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ABSTRACT

This paper, which focuses on student retention and success at community colleges, is part of a series published by the Center for Community College Policy, designed to support state and local policymakers, as well as educational leaders who are interested in policy issues related to the two-year postsecondary sector. Approximately half of the students entering college for the first time each year enroll in community colleges. Adults returning to education, workers needing retraining, and students at four-year institutions who concurrently enroll in a community college class all make up the student body mosaic. Each group has different goals from taking a one time only class to earning an associate's degree or transferring to a four-year institution. Due to the nature of the community college population, students make decisions to depart from college as they face adult responsibilities that impede academic progress. This document addresses a number of policy options that may increase student retention and success, including: (1) requiring colleges to report key student progress indicators; (2) earmarking funds that support special programs and incentives for "at-risk students"; (3) mandating basic-skills testing for new students; and (4) strengthening matriculation policies that guide and direct students. (AF)

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FOSTERING STUDENT RETENTION AND SUCCESS AT THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE

by James Palmer

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Introduction

Many people do not realize the large role community colleges play in sustaining or increasing the educational attainment of the population. Of the students entering college for the first time each year, approximately half enroll in community colleges. Many others who are not new to postsecondary education also turn to these institutions. Examples include the adult returning to college after an extended absence; the worker who requires skills upgrading; the four-year college student who enrolls concurrently in a community college class; the university student who encounters academic difficulty and needs to start again. All converge on the community college, pursuing goals that range from taking a single class to earning an associate's degree and transferring to a university.

Efficient completion of these goals is in everyone's best interest. State subsidies are more efficiently used (and students save time and money) when required courses are routinely offered, up-front academic advisement minimizes the need for students to retake courses or students enter college-level courses with the adequate academic skills. Although these are institutional responsibilities best handled at the college level, states can employ several policy options to emphasize the expectation that a concern for access — long a hallmark of the community college — be matched by a concern for student retention.

Background

All colleges and universities attempt to increase student retention and success. But this task is especially difficult at the community college, whose students often face adult responsibilities that impede academic progress, and who attend for a variety of purposes that defy easy categorization. Studies routinely show that students most often drop out because of conflicts posed by family or job obligations over which the colleges have little control. Even

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if these problems can be overcome, few students earn an associate's degree. Those who leave without a credential may not be "dropouts" in the negative sense. They may have transferred to a four-year college, completed a course or two in order to acquire a specific job skill or enrolled in classes simply to fulfill a personal interest. The potential outcomes of a community college education are as varied as the students who attend, making graduation rates questionable measures of community college impact.

In these circumstances it is difficult to determine which students fulfill their educational objectives and which do not. This problem is compounded by the community college's historical emphasis on access, which developed during the 1950s and 1960s when the contemporary community college system emerged. As states struggled to meet the growing demand for postsecondary education after World War II, enrollment increases were seen as ends unto themselves. Funding formulas were developed accordingly, tying state dollars to enrollments and focusing administrator concern on filling classroom seats. As a result, community colleges can report much about the number of students served but relatively little about what happens to those students over time.

Policymakers facing contemporary concerns for the return on investment in community college systems can employ several policy options that refocus attention on student retention and success. These options, described in Table 1, involve three strategies each with its pros and cons.

- Enhancing information on student progress, matching data on enrollments with data on the student experience over time
- Earmarking resources for college-based programs aimed at preventing the attrition of specific student populations
- Using regulations or incentives to strengthen the guidance students receive and ensure that college resources are not spread too thin in an attempt to be all things to all people.

III. Data Requirements as Policy Leverage: Accounting for Student Progress

One form of leverage that can be used by states to promote student retention is the authority to collect data from colleges and report those data to the public. Data that measure the size of the higher education enterprise in terms of enrollments, the number of faculty employed or expenditures within a given fiscal year can be augmented with carefully defined indicators of what happens to students over time. Assessments of student retention can then proceed from an empirical rather than anecdotal basis.

What progress indicators could be used? The federal Student Right to Know Act of 1988 required community colleges to report degree completion rates as the proportion of first-time degree-seeking students who, within three years of initial enrollment, earned an associate's degree. But because many students legitimately use community colleges without earning degrees at these institutions, other indicators must be employed. For example, some states report student transfer rates defined as the proportion of first-time students (or some subset thereof) who, within a specified time period, transfer to a four-year college or university. Student retention rates are another example, often measured as the proportion of students enrolled in a given fall semester who reenroll in the subsequent spring semester.

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Table 1
Summary and Appraisal of Policy Options That May Increase Student Retention and Success

Forms of Policy Leverage	Policy Goals that can be pursued with this Form of Leverage	Policy Options in Pursuit of Goal	Appraisal of the Policy Options	
			Potential Benefits	Potential Problems
Authority to request data and information from colleges.	To strengthen college accountability for student progress and degree attainment.	Require colleges to report key student progress indicators, such as semester-to-semester retention rates, graduation rates, rates of transfer to four-year colleges, etc. Provide fiscal rewards to colleges that meet specified goals related to student progress as measured by these indicators.	Provides needed information on what happens to students over time, not just on how many students are enrolled in any one term. Refocuses administrative attention from enrollments to student outcomes. Ties funding to performance.	The data are costly to collect and can easily be misinterpreted by the public. May lead colleges to favor the enrollment of more able students at the expense of higher risk students.
Authority to earmark funds for urgent state priorities.	To assure that students especially at risk of dropping out or who are receiving training that is especially needed in the state's economy receive services that maximize their chances of academic success.	Earmark funds that support special programs and incentives leading to the increased retention of "at-risk" students. Earmark funds that support special programs or incentives leading to the increased retention of students who are receiving training in high-demand jobs within the state.	Targets money to those who need it most. Addresses equity concerns for minorities and the poor. Ties student retention efforts to the state's economic development.	May unwittingly shift responsibility for the success of at-risk students from the faculty at large to the staff of special programs. Also, programs that facilitate the achievement of a particular group of students may unwittingly have negative effects on the progress of other students. May deemphasize the colleges' nonvocational educational roles.
Responsibility to oversee the academic quality of college programs.	To foster efficient student progression through the curriculum by ensuring that (a) students avoid courses for which they are not prepared, (b) students have accurate information about the courses they need to complete in order to graduate and (c) colleges can adequately meet student needs.	Mandate basic-skills testing for new students and require remediation for students with insufficient reading, writing or mathematics skills. Strengthen matriculation policies that guide and direct students, thereby preventing them from wandering aimlessly through the curriculum. Set priorities for which students may be enrolled.	Prevents students from taking classes for which they are ill-prepared. Helps emphasize that college programs constitute a sequenced educational experience for students, not just a collection of courses. Focuses college effort (in terms of both staff and resources) on defined student groups. Prevents colleges from trying to be all things to all people.	Testing programs are costly. Racial or cultural biases in testing instruments may have a negative impact on minorities. May be inappropriate for area citizens taking courses on an occasional basis to fulfill personal interests. Limits the degree to which area citizens may use the community college as an educational resource.

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States may increase the ante by tying at least some part of community college funding to the achievement of target goals that are measured by such progress indicators. For example, Tennessee's performance funding program offers budget supplements to colleges on the basis of their achievement in meeting 10 performance standards. One standard, "student success," is assessed as a function of year-to-year retention and persistence-to-graduation within a specified time period. The scoring rubric measuring college achievement in this standard includes comparisons in the retention and persistence-to-graduation rates between African-American and Caucasian students.

Fostering A Supportive Climate for Minority Students

Parkland College in Champaign, Illinois, has used government grant money to develop a holistic approach to the recruitment and retention of minority students. The intent is to transform the entire college environment in ways that create supportive communities. Going beyond traditional student services, the project stresses, among other strategies, faculty involvement in the development of multicultural instructional approaches.

For further information see: Z.M. Harris and P. Kayes. *New Statewide Initiative on Creating Inclusive Educational Communities for Minority Students.* Paper presented at the Annual Convention of the American Association of Community Colleges, Atlanta, GA:. ERIC Document Reproduction Service Number ED 397 891, 1996.

Knowing what happens to students over time is a first step in helping them achieve their educational goals. In addition, tying funding to outcomes provides an incentive to attend to student progress . But four caveats should be kept in mind by those who would use information mandates as a means of focusing institutional attention on student retention and success.

- **First, the cost of collecting persistence data is high.** College data systems, developed to capture enrollment figures and other data that support budget requests, are often not geared to track student progress over time. Funds devoted to the transformation of these data systems could be devoted to other retention efforts.
- **Second, indicators of student progress, such as persistence or transfer rates, are not absolute measures of institutional quality.** They are a means of understanding the student experience over time; they are not indicators of success or failure. For example, an institution that has a year-to-year retention rate of 32% is not necessarily a better institution than the college with a retention rate of 25%. Much depends on the contexts within which the colleges operate; an institution serving a poor, inner-city neighborhood will face entirely different circumstances than an institution serving a well-to-do suburban area. Public misinterpretation of the data can be avoided to the extent that they are reported with a full disclosure of definitions (such as the method used to calculate retention rates) and limitations. But fear of misinterpretation should not prevent the collection of longitudinal data.
- **Third, fiscal rewards for positive student outcomes may lead colleges to favor the enrollment of more able students at the expense of higher-risk students.** This may increase retention rates, but it may do nothing to increase the educational attainment of the population at large.
- **Finally, information on student outcomes over time should be matched by information on student educational intent.** When examining semester-by-semester transfer rates, for example, it is important for the public to understand that many community college students may have no intention of enrolling over an extended period of time.

Targeted Funds as Policy Leverage: Providing Support for Student Groups

Programs that provide special services for targeted student populations offer another way for states to increase student retention. For example, California law authorizes the establishment of a "Special Project Fund" that supports programs aimed at increasing the enrollment and retention of underrepresented students, including those with limited English proficiency, in both vocational and collegiate transfer curricula. Among other projects, the fund supports "Classroom-based research with an emphasis on collaborative learning methods and other teacher effectiveness strategies."

New Jersey has a similar fund supporting programs that recruit at-risk students and provide them with a variety of support services such as basic skills testing, academic and financial advisement, personal and career counseling, tutoring, remedial instruction (where needed) and an orientation to college life.

Because these programs focus attention on minority students and others whose retention may be relatively low, their subsidy is a form of leverage that promotes the state's interest in educational equity. Targeted funds supporting student retention might also be employed to further the state's economic development goals. For example, the 1997 Virginia legislature authorized the state's Board of Community Colleges to establish an incentive scholarship fund that will be made available to "second-year, full-time community college students who have a B average or better and who are enrolled in designated technical training programs that address Virginia's workforce training needs." Other examples of state initiatives promoting student retention in the name of economic development can be found in programs supporting the occupational training of public-aid recipients.

The good intentions of specially funded incentives or dropout prevention programs should not blind policymakers to their limitations. One problem is the potential to isolate specific student groups on campus. The presence of an office for underrepresented students, for example, may lead the faculty and other members of the campus community to feel that responsibility for those students lies solely with the staff at that office.

A second limitation is that efforts to help one group of students may work against efforts to retain another group of students. For example, the retention of younger students who pursue their studies full time may depend on efforts to build strong faculty-student ties through extensive out-of-class involvement in student government and other campus activities. Programs that promote this type of involvement, however, may be counterproductive for working adults who are best served by off-campus or online classes that make instruction as easy or convenient as possible.

Program Oversight as Policy Leverage: Ensuring Efficient Student Progression

Drawing on varying forms of state authority to ensure academic quality, a third approach to dropout prevention and efficient degree completion lies in policies that foster efficient student progression through the curriculum. These policies emphasize the expectation that students will have the skills needed for success in college classrooms and that they will receive accurate information about the courses they need to complete in order to meet their degree goals. The intent is to maximize students' chances for achieving their goals within the shortest time possible.

- **Basic Skills Testing.** One policy option is to mandate basic-skills

Indicators of Student Progression

States collect data on enrollment and other measures of the magnitude of the community college enterprise. But there are relatively few indicators of student progress over time.

Such indicators, however, can be reported. Several states, for example, have participated in the Transfer Assembly Project, calculating rates of student transfer from community colleges to four-year institutions. A consistent methodology is employed, looking at the transfer (within four years of enrollment) of a specific population — first-time community college students who enroll in a given term and who earn at least 12 hours of course credit.

The use of a consistent definition assures comparability between institutions and over time. National results have shown an average transfer rate of approximately 25%, with variations by college. This says nothing about the effectiveness of the community college transfer function; many students enroll without the intention of transferring in the first place. But it does replace anecdotal information with an empirical foundation for further study. (For further information see: A.M. Cohen., "Analyzing Community College Student Transfer Rates," *New Directions for Community Colleges*, 22 (2), 71-79.)

testing for entering students and to require remedial instruction for students with insufficient reading, writing or mathematics skills. For example, the Administrative Code for the State of Washington requires Highline Community College to provide "assessment for advising, placement and retention. . . for all new students with less than 45 transferable college-level credits" and for those entering selected courses. Such testing has become a common practice nationwide since the early 1980s. It helps prevent students from enrolling in classes for which they are ill-prepared, a problem that is especially prevalent in the open-access community college.

- **Guidance and Feedback.** A second policy option is to go beyond testing, requiring the community colleges to provide students with adequate guidance and feedback as they pursue defined educational ends. In California, for example, policymakers used the state's education code to mandate a comprehensive matriculation program for community college students. The college is to provide basic-skills testing, lay out a clear road map of the courses students need to complete to reach their education goals, maintain standards of academic progress, monitor student progress and conduct research on the factors that promote student success. The student is to follow the road map provided by the college and adhere to the standards of academic progress.

- **Enrollment Priorities.** A third option is to set enrollment priorities that help focus college efforts on targeted student groups rather than trying to meet the needs of all comers. California again provides a prominent example. As the gap between enrollment demand and available funding expanded in the early 1990s, a task force convened by the board of governors of the California community colleges drafted recommended registration guidelines that give first priority to matriculated students who intend to transfer, earn a credential (associate's degree or certificate), acquire entry-level job skills or upgrade job skills.

  Among matriculated students, priority was to be given first to continuing students (those enrolling for two or more consecutive semesters), followed (in order) by recent high school graduates, other new or returning students and new students who already hold the baccalaureate. These priorities clearly show a preference for devoting resources to students engaged in sustained study leading to credentials or jobs; those taking occasional courses to fulfill personal interests have lower priority.

These policies also reflect a fundamental shift in thinking about open access, replacing the notion that students have a right to "show up" for courses, with the expectation that student use of community college resources lead to defined ends in as efficient a manner as possible. Although community colleges are the neighborhood schools of higher education, attempting to serve all comers within specified service districts, their effectiveness may be limited to the extent that students take courses with minimal guidance or that the colleges establish no priorities as to whose education needs will be met. Some have argued that community colleges should outsource or cede altogether peripheral educational functions rather than attempt to be all things to all people.

A primary concern, however, has been the possible effect on access and opportunity for minority students. Care must be taken to eliminate cultural or racial bias in tests used to assess students' basic skills. The possible diminution of citizen opportunities to pursue personal-interest studies on a lifelong-learning basis is also a concern. Policies that emphasize the younger, degree-seeking population clearly reflect a sentiment that taking courses for the sake of learning alone is, in terms of public subsidy, a low priority. How this may affect overall quality of life, an admittedly intangible benefit, has yet to be studied.

VI Connections With Other Policy Areas

Several other policy areas, besides those mentioned in this paper, have a bearing on student retention and success. These include the following:

- **Finance.** The continued use of enrollment as the primary criterion for college funding may have to be reconsidered. The fiscal need to fill classroom seats can work against college attempts to guide students through the curriculum. It is feasible that rigorous student testing and placement may reduce overall enrollments, thereby penalizing colleges for engaging in efforts that policymakers say are important for dropout prevention.
- **Articulation with Secondary Schools.** The chances for student success increase to the extent that high schools adequately prepare pupils for college work. Although community colleges serve many adults who have long since graduated from high school, fully one-half of the community college students in credit classes are 24 or younger. Policies aimed at enhancing their success cannot be viewed independently from attempts to reform the schools.
- **Articulation with Four-Year Colleges.** Many students enroll at community colleges with the intent of moving on to four-year institutions. Their success depends on policies that facilitate

South Carolina's Developmental Education Student Retention Tracking System (DESRTS)

DESRTS is a computerized tracking system used by the South Carolina State Board for Technical and Comprehensive Education to assess the retention and graduation of technical college students who enter with inadequate basic skills. Two groups of first-time students are tracked over a five-year period: (a) students who score high enough on assessment tests to take college-level courses but who need some developmental classes, and (b) students who need prerequisite assistance before enrolling in college-level classes. Comparisons are made between students who complete required remedial course-work and students who do not.

For further information, see: M.G. Amick. *Developmental Education Student Retention Tracking System. Institutional Booklet, Revised.* Columbia; S.C.; South Carolina State Board for Technical and Comprehensive Education. ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. 400 012, 1996.

transfer between two-year and four-year colleges with minimal loss of time or credit. Policymakers must understand that this is as much the responsibility of the four-year college as the community college.

- **Workforce and Economic Development.** As community colleges assume an ever-greater role in workforce training and retraining, new measures of student progress may have to be considered. Transfer rates, semester-to-semester retention rates and other academic benchmarks may have to be augmented by measures of worker skill attainment. The degree to which colleges receive repeat business for customized training may also be an appropriate indicator.

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